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ABSTRACT

In the San Francisco Bay Area (California), community agencies and organizations routinely use teenagers as mentors and teachers of peers and younger children. Despite the literature indicating that teens should derive many benefits from these roles, agency staff have observed teen teachers who appear frustrated, bored, or disengaged, or who have adopted negative group management techniques. Ongoing research is attempting to identify "best practices" that contribute to positive outcomes for adolescent cross-age teachers, as well as program gaps that are barriers to positive outcomes. This research involves observations and interviews with directors and teen participants in eight programs concerned with community recreation, preschool operations, youth development, coping with high-risk community environments, experiential science education, and substance abuse prevention. Preliminary findings indicate that particular program characteristics may increase the likelihood that teens who serve as cross-age teachers will have positive outcomes. Successful programs usually have a passionately committed program director or other adult who works closely with the teenagers; high expectations for teenagers, with significant levels of responsibility; and incremental orientation and training strategies that set up teens for success. This research project is the first phase in preparing community agencies to implement successful cross-age and peer teacher programs. (SV)

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AN INVESTIGATION OF STRATEGIES FOR PREPARING TEENAGERS FOR CROSS-AGE AND PEER TEACHING ROLES: IMPLICATIONS FOR LINKING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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Abstract
Research suggests teens who serve as cross-age teachers may derive a number of personal benefits. This study seeks to identify program characteristics which increase the likelihood teens who serve as cross-age teachers will have positive outcomes as a result of their teaching experiences.

Note: At the time of this writing (June 1996), this research is in progress.

Background
Research evidence indicates youth service can play a role in alleviating many of the problems faced by today's youth, including alienation from families, schools, and communities and involvement in risk-taking activities which may lead to teen pregnancy and substance abuse (Benard, 1990). Of the many youth service activities available to youth, cross-age and peer teaching, in which teens teach younger youth and less experienced peers, has been shown to be among the most effective at providing youth, particularly those considered to be "at-risk," with opportunities which will lead to healthy development and avoidance of delinquent behaviors.

Researchers Damon and Phelps (1989) state, "peer interaction is conducive, perhaps even essential, to a host of important early achievements" (p. 135). Other researchers cite peer and cross-age interaction as crucial to social development among youth (Johnson & Johnson, 1983). Research, summarized by resiliency expert Bonnie Benard (1990), shows peer relationships contribute to youth development in that they:

- provide opportunities for pro-social development, including adoption of attitudes, values and skills, through peer modeling and reinforcement;
- shape youth's behavior through frequent, intense and diverse interactions with one another;
- shape moral standards through group agreement;
- encourage empathy and altruistic behaviors;
- provide practice in social skills, including communication, critical thinking and friendship;
- increase academic achievement. (Peer acceptance and friendship-making skills are linked to higher school attendance and higher academic performance);
- influence identity and autonomy.

Researchers suggest we could mitigate the societal alienation which may be at the base of many social and psychological problems including alcohol and drug abuse, through the adoption of values based on cooperation and mutual support (Nobles, 1984). In fact, some researchers believe that providing youth with opportunities to participate, such as in peer and cross-age teaching relationships, is the single most important factor in alleviating social problems among youth (Rutter, 1979).

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However, the research literature on teens as cross-age teachers is very limited. Much of the work took place in the 70s, and even then few large-scale, comprehensive models were studied. Fewer studies have been conducted since then but it appears that as little as seven percent of time in so-called peer and cross-age cooperative programs is actually devoted to a "hands-on" experience, that is, teens teaching other youth. Thus, relatively little is known about the real benefits realized by cross-age teachers.

Statement of Purpose

In California's San Francisco Bay Area, institutions and agencies, such as park and recreation departments, community-based organizations and child care centers, routinely use teens as teachers and mentors in their programs. Despite the research literature that indicates teens in these roles should derive many benefits, teen teachers who appear frustrated, bored, disengaged and/or have adopted negative group management techniques modeled by adult agency staff are often observed. It has been noted that many of the programs using teens as teachers/mentors do not seem to be achieving the social and individual achievement benefits that are reported in the literature and that a lack of effective preparation and continued support, as well as a reluctance to provide teens with opportunities to assume genuine responsibility, may be contributing factors.

The purpose of this study is to identify current "best practices" that contribute to positive outcomes for teenaged cross-age teachers and to determine possible program gaps that may contribute to a lack of positive outcomes. Specifically, objectives are to identify:

- how agencies currently prepare cross-age teachers for their roles;
- the critical ingredients that are (or are not) incorporated into teaching preparation;
- the extent to which cross-age teachers are given genuine roles of responsibility;
- effective, practical strategies employed which are supported by the research base.

This study will identify gaps in current programs and strategies needed to address them. Once effective strategies have been identified, they can be implemented community-wide by agencies currently offering cross-age and peer teaching programs and by agencies which may be appropriate sites for new cross-age teacher programs but currently lack the appropriate know-how.

Research Design

The literature suggests that qualitative research methods are most appropriate for this study. The research questions of this study are both exploratory in nature, for example "What is happening in these programs?" and "what are the salient characteristics?" and explanatory, including "What events, attitudes, etc. are shaping the programs?" and "How do these forces interact to prepare or not prepare teens for their teaching/mentoring roles?" Exploratory and explanatory questions are best answered through qualitative research which incorporates context and setting thus providing a deeper understanding of the participants' experience of the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

The research methods are also collaborative in nature. That is, agency staff and the youth who serve as cross-age teachers are involved in the study as partners, not as subjects to be "picked apart." The literature shows that groups who are actively involved in the research process adopt an awareness of theoretical perspectives which then guide their practice (Reason, 1994). Since the ultimate goal of the study is to help agencies link theory with practice, this is an important design element.

In keeping with the qualitative design, research strategies have been determined through a facilitated, collaborative process. Strategies include: field study, multi-site case studies, review of program documents, and ethnography. Collection techniques to support these strategies include:

- Participant observation - trainers and cross-age teachers are being observed during training and when teens work with younger youth. Ethnographic field notes are recorded, coded and analyzed.

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- In-depth interviewing - agency staff and cross-age teachers from a representative sample of agencies are being interviewed.
- Program records and documents - a history of the programs, their mission and philosophy regarding cross-age and peer teacher/mentor programs will be used to inform the background, scope and activities of the agencies.
- Past research - a literature review and past assessments by the agencies is being used to inform the current research as well as for validity.

The literature notes that successful qualitative research requires flexibility . That is, strategies used and collection techniques employed need to be determined as the research evolves (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). To this end, additional methods are being added as needed.

Preliminary Findings

To date eight in-depth interviews with program directors, an in-depth interview with a teenaged participant, and field observations of a teen teacher program have been conducted. Data collection will be completed this summer when more teen teacher programs are in operation.

	Program Description
Site 1	Teens teach small groups of youngsters who visit a vegetable garden site. Teens were originally included as a way to ensure there that was enough staff to enable younger children to have "hands-on" learning experiences. Experience has shown that there are many benefits for the teens who participate.
Site 2	As part of a high school class, teens are trained to operate and teach at an on-site preschool. The preschool is a popular licensed facility and teens are involved with all aspects of operation.
Site 3	A demonstration/research project that is part of the University of California 4-H Youth Development Program in an inner-city. Teens are trained to work with younger children and teens who participated in the previous year help to train teenaged teachers the following year.
Site 4	Teens are trained to co-facilitate a workshop with an adult for their peers or slightly younger youth. Teens help to plan the sessions which are designed for specific groups.
Site 5	Teens who live in high-risk environments and are experiencing the challenges of living in such environments are hired to work with small groups of youngsters in a variety of community settings. This program is a component of the Camp Fire Girls and Boys program.
Site 6	A recreation-based after-school program where teens are trained to supervise youngsters at various community playgrounds.
Site 7	Teens in a wide variety of settings (after school, in-school, camps, etc.) nationwide are trained in an experiential science curriculum for younger children.
Site 8	A county-wide program where 600 high school-aged teens from 25 high schools are trained in teams for 40 hours to work with middle school students to prevent youth from using/abusing alcohol and drugs.

Analysis

Data analysis is currently in progress and will also be completed this summer. The researcher are using two basic approaches to analyze data: predefined categories according to research questions and grounded theory. A start list code (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was developed from the original research questions to analyze the data relative to our original research questions. As suggested by Strauss (1987) open coding is also being used to scrutinize data to produce concepts that fit the data but may not be related to the original research questions.

Although the program's studies are similar in that they all had teenagers working with younger children, we found a great variation in the details of these programs. These programs are targeted at teenagers

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from different backgrounds and provide varied experiences for them. The original purposes of the programs also varied; many began by viewing teenagers as a good source of teachers/supervisors of younger children, but all have come to recognize the value of this type of experience to teenagers.

Preliminary analysis indicates that particular program characteristics may increase the likelihood that teens who serve as cross-age teachers will have positive outcomes as a result of their teaching experiences. Successful programs usually have:

- a passionately committed program director or other adult who works closely with the teenagers;
- high expectations for teenagers with significant levels of responsibilities;
- incremental strategies to ensure a successful experience for the participating teenagers.

Passionate, committed program director. The adults who develop and operate these varied programs appear to be more important than any particular program model. The key to success appears to be an adult with a vision and commitment to produce positive outcomes for teenagers. Positive outcomes may be produced with a wide range of program models. This finding is consistent with McLaughlin, Irby and Langman's (1994) five-year, nationwide ethnographic study of inner-city adolescents. They found that a wide variety of programs produced positive outcomes for youth living in high-risk environments. They suggest the key factor in program success is the adults, with a wide range of personalities and skills, who create urban sanctuaries that give hope to young people. Likewise we found that successful programs for teenaged teachers depend more on passionately committed adults rather than any particular program model.

High expectations. Resiliency research on youth who are successful despite living in high-risk environments suggests that high expectations of youth in the family, school and community is a critical factor (Benard, 1991). In successful teenaged teacher programs, teenagers consistently "rose to the occasion" when they were expected to perform at high levels. Depending on the program model, teens were expected to conduct research on younger children's learning styles, conduct community needs assessments, and plan and conduct high quality programs for younger children. Teenagers were successful in these endeavors. Communicating the importance of teaching younger children and being positive role models seemed to create situations where the teens believed that they were engaged in meaningful, significant work and therefore performing at a high level was critical.

Setting up teens for success. High expectations alone are not adequate to ensure that teenagers would be successful teachers and have positive outcomes from the experience of teaching younger children. Successful teen teacher programs have preliminary and incremental steps to prepare teenagers for successful experiences. Some programs have extensive application and orientation procedures to ensure that participating teens realize the expectations of the program. Other programs have intensive training components to prepare teenagers for their roles. It is unreasonable to expect that teenagers are prepared to be teachers. Successful program have found that teens need to be trained extensively initially and on an ongoing basis, particularly when teens are expected to display positive, innovative teaching behaviors such as engaging youngsters in discovery or providing hands-on learning experiences.

Summary

Researchers believe if cross-age and peer cooperation models are implemented community-wide eventually an ethos of cooperation, caring, mutual respect and participation will occur among youth (Benard, 1990). Only when community agencies are fully prepared to train and support youth involved in cross-age and peer cooperation programs can these projected outcomes be realized. This project is the first phase in preparing agencies for implementing successful cross-age and peer teacher/cooperation programs. As such, this project has potential for impacting the thousands of teenagers employed and volunteering as cross-age and peer teachers, particularly those who are disenfranchised and thought to be "at-risk," and the communities in which they live.

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